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THE PRINCETON PRECEPTORIAL SYSTEM

Much interest has been manifested of late in the introduction at Princeton of a new method of undergraduate instruction known as the Preceptorial System. After four years of successful incubation the new venture received last June baptismal endorsement from the first class to enter college after its introduction and has already come to be looked upon as a permanent institution at Princeton. It may accordingly not be inappropriate at the present juncture for one who has had the good fortune to take part in this interesting experiment to attempt a brief sketch of the origin, practical operation, and underlying principles of the new system.

To appreciate fully the occasion of the introduction of the Preceptorial System, momentary reference must be made to the tendency of undergraduate instruction in our larger universities during the past few years. It will, I think, be granted that the problem of numbers has been one of the most vexed questions with which these universities have had to deal. It has become a matter of familiar comment that the growing size of college classes in these institutions no longer permits the close association between student and teacher that used to exist in earlier days when college classes were smaller. Neither in the large classroom recitation nor in the crowded lecture hall has it remained possible to perform the salutary task of holding the individual student to account for daily performances. Infrequent opportunity to recite, on the one hand, and lack of all opportunity to do so, on the other, has too frequently suffered the healthful habit of daily study to sink into innocuous desuetude. Even the final examination — the last disciplinary refuge of our present system — has been largely deprived of its traditional terrors by the extensive vogue of the eleventh-hour syllabus. How to reënlist the jaded interest of the student in the wholesome discipline of daily tasks is the problem which Princeton has undertaken to solve, and the Preceptorial System is her solution.

Plans for a reform upon the lines just indicated had been con-

templated by Woodrow Wilson some years before he became president of Princeton University, and in the summer of 1902 Dean West of this university visited England in order to embody in the new curriculum at Princeton the best features of the tutorial system at Oxford. The new plan of instruction was announced in the Princeton Alumni Weekly for February 25, 1905, formally ratified by the Board of Trustees in June of the same year, and finally put into operation by the appointment of forty-seven preceptors — drawn from the faculties of thirty-six institutions — who entered upon their new duties the following September. The essential features of the new programme may be briefly outlined as follows.

At the outset of the academic year students in all save the scientific departments of the university¹ are distributed among the several preceptors assigned to each of these departments. Each preceptor then divides his men into small sections of not more than three to five members apiece. These men he meets for personal conference either in a college room or, preferably, in the informal surroundings of his own study. To secure continuity of association the preceptor invariably retains the men originally assigned to his charge so long as they continue in his department.² The preceptorial conference takes the place of one of the weekly hours formerly devoted to the recitation or lecture. Though regularly employed to supplement courses conducted by means of recitation (as in the more disciplinary subjects, such as the Languages), preceptorial instruction has proved more effective when used to supplement courses conducted by means of lecture (as in the more discursive subjects, such as History, Philosophy, and Literature). As between these two kinds of courses, the duties and opportunities of the preceptor differ to a certain degree. In the former case the somewhat inflexible character of the subject-matter frequently obliges the preceptor to pursue something of the same general

¹ In the scientific department of the university the existing system of laboratory assistants renders the preceptor unnecessary.

² Usually for a period of from two to four years. A preceptor gives instruction only within his own chosen department. Consequently a student has a separate preceptor in each of the departments in which his work lies.

method as the classroom instructor; whereas in the latter, the less formal and restricted nature of the subject-matter permits him to pursue a method of his own. To differentiate accurately between the function of the lecturer and the preceptor is not always possible. Much depends upon the nature of the course. In general, however, the two may be said to cover the same subject-matter, but each in his own way and independently of the other. In the majority of cases the difference in method may perhaps best be defined by saying that the lecturer provides the framework of the course while the preceptor contributes body and substance to the structure. Thus the two methods supplement without overlapping one another. To strengthen his moral hold upon the student the preceptor is forbidden to read examination papers or to report absences. Any disposition to slight preceptorial work is provided against by assigning more weight to the opinion of the preceptor than to the examination in the determination of standing. Moreover, in case of neglect, the preceptor may recommend that a student be debarred from final examination and thus be obliged to take the course over again. At the end of the term the grades of a student and, in certain cases, the nature of the examination questions are determined by a joint conference of lecturer or classroom instructor and preceptors.

But the foregoing provisions constitute only the external machinery by which the Preceptorial System is administered. To gain a realizing sense of the true intent of the system it is necessary to direct attention to certain spiritual principles of which these somewhat mechanical regulations are merely the outward embodiment. A failure to realize these principles has given rise to certain misapprehensions in the minds of many observers of the system which it will be the incidental purpose of the following remarks to correct.

It has, in the first place, often been supposed that the small preceptorial division has been organized solely for the purpose of more constant and rigorous discipline. But if this were the case, our system would differ in no respects from that which prevails in many other colleges in which large classes are similarly subdivided. At Harvard, for example, certain lecture

classes are periodically broken up into small divisions for purposes of quiz and oral cross-examination. With us, on the other hand, the small division exists primarily to provide opportunities for the formation of such personal relationship between teacher and student as shall render discipline unnecessary. Our system, in other words, is based on the old idea that all true teaching is personal and owes its efficacy to the direct impact of mind upon mind. The principle is a simple one and at least as old as Socrates. It finds expression in the traditional relationship between master and disciple, and in varying form has lain at the basis of every period of intellectual advance. It was, for example, the principle employed by Abelard at Paris, Arnold at Rugby, Jowett at Oxford, and Hopkins at Williams. Thus the Princeton system represents a reapplication to present academic conditions in America of a principle that can be traced back to the dawn of our civilization.

In the second place, the Preceptorial System is not, as is often thought, a coaching system. The preceptor is not, like the Oxford tutor, a drill master, primarily intent upon getting his men through the examination. As already stated, the preceptor is expressly forbidden to read examination papers or to report absences. Proceeding upon the principle of Dr. Johnson, that "what a man reads as a task will do him little good," he seeks rather to develop in his men an independent love of learning as an end in itself and without regard to the final examination. As a matter of fact, the experience of the last few years has shown that a man will often read with greater relish a book that is not required by his instructor. Not long ago a student chanced to remark to a club friend that he had been up late the night before over a certain "red" book—known to the world at large as LeRoy's *Philippine Life in Town and Country*—and when informed that the book in question was prescribed in "Politics," exclaimed with an air of profound disgust that had he known that beforehand he would never have read it.

Finally, the Preceptorial System has often been looked upon as a sort of intellectual go-cart, intended to facilitate the acquisition of knowledge with the least possible expenditure of energy on the part of the student. This supposition rests upon

an equally erroneous conception. If, on the one hand, the preceptor is not a drill-master armed with the rod of pedagogic authority, neither is he, on the other, an intellectual wet-nurse appointed to feed predigested pabulum to queasy stomachs. His office is rather to act as mediator between the student and his work. He attempts, in the triple capacity of "guide, philosopher, and friend," to liberate the student's latent abilities, to put him in possession of the dormant capacities of his own mind. He soon learns how to adapt himself to the varying capacities and needs of the different individuals in his group. The dull or indolent man is not encouraged to stray far from the beaten track, but to the bright or ambitious man is given opportunity to make side excursions hither and yon in accordance with his capacity. In this way each man is encouraged to do his share of the common work and to do it thoroughly. And encouragement is all that is needed. An expressed wish or chance suggestion leads every man to do his best, if not from the higher motive of self-satisfaction, at least from the desire to please his preceptor. The advantage both to preceptor and student of this mutual accommodation can hardly be overestimated. It has already drawn students from the street, preceptors from the club, and books from the library.

But perhaps the best idea of the system may be gained by a bit of concrete illustration. The preceptor is often asked by the curious visitor at Princeton: "But just what do you do with your men during the preceptorial hour?" and perhaps an answer to this question will place the whole matter in a clearer light. We will suppose, for example, that the conference is in English and that the four men who normally compose the group are assembled in the study of the preceptor. On entrance they find their instructor surrounded by scholastic tomes brightened, it may be, by the blaze of an open fire, or mellowed by evidences of the humanizing companionship of a pipe. We will suppose that the subject for the hour is English Literature of the Eighteenth Century. Hardly have the customary greetings of the day been exchanged when one of the men will exclaim, "this stuff by Collins is not what I call poetry; it is simply rot." This frank avowal of dislike is vastly preferable to

indifference and at once gives the preceptor his clue. It now becomes the latter's turn to delegate the adjudication of Collins' claims as a poet to other members of the group. Two of the remaining members, we will suppose, concur, in somewhat milder language, with the opinion of Mr. A. The fourth, rather perhaps for the sake of singularity than from conviction, admits that the poet is not so awfully bad after all, and when called upon to support his admission with evidence, will recollect a felicitous phrase or striking audacity of conception which, he is willing to allow, may, in some measure, redeem the poet from the charge of unmitigated barbarity. Seizing upon this chance observation the preceptor will then proceed to build up Collins' claims to respectful consideration. In this way the conference will, in an important sense, be taken out of the preceptor's own hands and proceed upon whatever line may be suggested by the chance observation of one of the group. By thus allowing his men to determine the direction of the discussion of the hour, the preceptor will discover on what side poetry will often make its first appeal to the unbiased mind, and out of it may develop certain important aspects of a poet's work which might otherwise have been overlooked. At least he is meeting the student on his own ground and using the weapons of the men with whom he is dealing. Again we will suppose that an earlier period of English Literature is under examination. A student expresses his disgust at the absurd childishness of Spenser's picture of the "milk-white lamb" of Una. Such a representation seems silly and beneath the notice of a thoughtful man; "it makes a fellow sick to read such drool." Here again the preceptor may meet the issue squarely. Perhaps an essential part of the poet's meaning may be couched in a representation apparently so childish. Perhaps the "milk-white lamb" may here be used to typify the unsullied lustre of Truth and the attribute expressed metaphorically just as Truth herself is figuratively shadowed forth in the person of the damsel Una. With this similitude it will then be possible to compare the "backward-bent knees" of "the wild wood gods" and other allegorical representations by which the poet pictures the power of Truth. By this means a general discussion may be precipitated upon

the relation of Spenser to Plato, the symbolic value of art, and the means whereby the poet embodies abstract ideas in the form of the tangible and concrete. Images the most awful may be summoned from the pages of Milton through association with which "the milk-white lamb" of Una is seen to rise beyond the dwarfing limitations of literal interpretation and assume the broader significance of allegory. Still again, the inanity of *The Waggoner*, *The Idiot Boy*, or other early Wordsworthian ventures may not unjustly provoke the scorn of the undergraduate. He will question your right to set before him such specimens of driveling imbecility. Here again the instinctive feeling of disgust may be converted into a general discussion of the important principle that Homer sometimes nods, and a debate may ensue upon the soundness of the doctrine that a poet should always be judged by his best work. It thus follows that no general rule may be laid down as to the best method of conducting the preceptorial conference. Much depends upon the ingenuity of the preceptor. As a rule, any device that will stimulate independent thinking is of value. Skilfully contrived questions will frequently lead a student to the habit of useful induction. Oftentimes diversity in the method of conducting a conference serves a useful purpose. Sometimes special topics connected with the work in hand are assigned to each man; at others, one man is called upon to defend a certain position, another to attack him; and at others, general discussion occurs in which each man bears a part. Carefully prepared essays dealing with the reading of the course are required periodically. These essays are then corrected by the preceptor and gone over with each student in turn at a special hour appointed for the purpose. Again, the tactics that serve in the case of one man may not serve in the case of another. Mr. A. may be stimulated by the fascination of congenial conference, Mr. B. by a sense of responsibility in the preparation of some set task, Mr. C. by an opportunity to embark upon some fresh scholarly quest. Thus the general object of each conference is to induce each participant to contribute his share to the common work of the group, to make him realize that the success of the hour depends upon his own personal exertions.

Such in brief is what we have been trying to do for our undergraduates during the last five years at Princeton. With what success our labors have been crowned is not, perhaps, a question for one on the inside to answer. Outside testimony may, however, be cited to indicate the general trend of unbiased opinion. Not long ago a Yale professor, who favored us with his presence at a rehearsal of one of the older English plays annually presented by Princeton students, observed one of the cast approach a preceptor with a request for "the makings." Now I understand, he said, what the Preceptorial System has done for Princeton. Under it the barrier that formerly separated the students from the faculty has broken down. Pleasant acquaintances often leading to life-long friendships are formed between student and preceptor. Members of the faculty are frequently entertained at dinner by the students and students by the faculty. A student will frequently drop into his preceptor's room for a talk or take a walk or canoe-trip with him in the neighborhood. Above all, a very substantial beginning has been made towards providing the means by which the student may be permitted to see that his instructor is not altogether devoid of human qualities and the preceptor that his pupil can give him many valuable hints in the art of teaching.

We thus have hopes of reestablishing at Princeton a scholarly confederation in which teachers and taught are alike learners and colleagues the one of the other. Students and teachers are at last coming to realize that their interests are not disjoined but united, and that both are bound on a common intellectual quest. Many features of our academic life at Princeton are admirably fitted to work together with the Preceptorial System towards a grand humanistic consummation. The emphasis increasingly laid on the classics — in respect to which Princeton is unique among American universities,— the prevalence of the group system of electives — whereby the student falls under the direction of a single preceptor in some one of the great branches of humanistic study,— and the secluded life apart from the distracting influences of the city and enriched by the noble architecture that adorns our college campus conspire to revive in Princeton "the quiet and still air of delightful studies."

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